



Medical School Hotline

Role of the Library and Librarians in Medical Education at the John A. Burns School of Medicine

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An informal poll of medical students indicated that they consider the library resources central to their learning process, especially with the problem based learning curriculum. They acquire skills that they will use during their clerkships as they strive to keep up with changes in medical practice throughout their careers. Marshall et al found that students in a problem based learning program tended to use the library more frequently, for longer periods of time and used library resources for a greater proportion of their study materials.¹

A JABSOM's student remarked:

"...the librarian can have a fairly substantial role in general medical education, especially in a curriculum like ours where the basic reading is left to students to discover. For me, librarians provide a great service in helping to develop research ideas and in literature searches for research projects, mainly in helping navigate the often confusing information sources available, both in the physical library and on the internet."

Librarians play a visible role in answering reference questions, providing workshops on searching the literature, and introducing students to the range of resources available. They also play a critical behind the scenes role in selecting and acquiring resources and making them accessible to their clientele. These roles continue, but technology has changed the way that library resources are made available and used. A critical part of the role of medical librarians is the teaching of information retrieval skills to medical students.

In 1989, MEDLINE was available for searches in the libraries via CD-ROM programs or dial-up modem through Grateful Med, a menu driven program that did not allow interactive searching (i.e. users received immediate feedback regarding their searches). This is taken for granted today but was a novelty in 1989. Few medical students had email accounts and students were just beginning to use the CD-ROM programs for searching MEDLINE. Students were being taught to search the journal literature with Index Medicus with heavy reliance on books and journals in the library.

Today, students have a small reference library available to them through databases such as *MDConsult*, *StatRef*, and *Scientific American Medicine*, plus a host of clinical journals via OVID. These resources are available 24 hours a day/7 days a week through Hawaii Medical Library and Hamilton Library.

This range of resources, print and electronic, is introduced to the students at the beginning of their studies through lecture and workshops conducted by the librarians at Hawaii Medical Library and JABSOM Library Resource Center (formerly the School of Public Health Library). The JABSOM problem-based learning curriculum makes effective use of library resources (teaching and references services) that are a "must" for students.

The librarians, as resource persons, are available for students. Students come in to look for epidemiologic data regarding a given

condition, or they might want to know the best treatment options related to the psychological aspects associated with a specific disease condition. These questions evolve into informal teaching opportunities as the librarians model searching behaviors that the student can use in the future. The librarians conduct workshops that deal with searching for the best "evidence" in the practice of medicine. These are skills that they will need as they practice in the community.

In their less visible role, librarians work behind the scenes to develop services that might best meet the need of the users. This includes selecting databases, journal titles, books, negotiating electronic licenses, and creating library web pages to make titles accessible within and without the library. There is the constant vigilance and troubleshooting required to make access seamless. Publishers and other providers are continually modifying their systems that cause links on the library's web pages not to work. A whole new layer of tasks have evolved around the electronic resources in addition to the printed journals and books.

The need for medical students to learn information retrieval skills has been recognized for many years² but the expansion in technology and information makes efficient use of these resources paramount. Years ago an officer of the Hawaii Medical Association, when asked for his support regarding continuing educating credits for a MEDLINE searching workshop, commented that learning to search the MEDLINE database should be thought of by physicians as a tool to be added to their armamentarium, like using a stethoscope or running and interpreting an EKG. Recently the "better_health Delphi Study" of the American Association of Medical Colleges, examined the views of the future by deans of medical schools, CEOs of teaching hospitals, and directors of medical libraries regarding the future of health care. They rated highly the statements that by 2010, "all current biomedical and clinical journals are available in digital format" and "information management skills will be assessed as a routine component of clinical skills."³

This is a period of transition in the role of the library in medical education. Much of the latest and best clinical information is available on the desktop via the library. The library and librarians play a key role in the effectiveness of physicians.

References:

1. Marshall JG, Fitzgerald D, Busby L, Heaton G. A study of library use in problem-based and traditional medical curricula. *Bull Med Libr Assoc.* Jul 1993;81(3):299-305.
2. Contemporary issues in medicine--medical informatics and population health: report II of the Medical School Objectives Project. *Acad Med.* Feb 1999;74(2):130-141.
3. American Association of Medical Colleges. Better Health 2010 Final Report. Appendix C: the better_health@here.now Delphi Study. American Association of Medical Colleges. October 29, 2001. Available at: <http://www.aamc.org/programs/betterhealth/appdxc1.pdf>. Accessed September 4, 2002.

